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Look Back In

MANGA MANGA

MANGA VIDEO TITLES REACH GREATER
HEIGHTS IN THE CHARTS EVERY MONTH.
M PONTING SLIPS SOME RAW EELS
TO HIS POCKET AND EXPLAINS THE
FUTURE OF JAPANESE ANIMATION:
GOOD, GUTS, SEX AND ALL.

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Watching an anime film is like getting your head stuck in the bass bin at a Metallica concert. Jangling visual themes scream across the screen at breakneck pace, in a world of science fantasy drawn from the morbid imaginations of Japanese animators. The themes are representative of the obsessions of post-war Japanese man: apocalypse, robotics, spiritualism, violent sex and sexy violence. Not necessarily in that order.

Or at least, that's how anime fans feel about their 'art form'. Others don't analyse anime with as much intellectual enthusiasm. My wife for example. 'Oh God, he's watching his cartoons for sad overgrown kids again,' she thinks.

The truth is probably somewhere between the two extremes. Anime is indubitably a sophisticated form of animation. It's also very controversial outside the confines of Japanese contemporary culture, and to many Western palates appears amorally violent, pornographic and sexist. And until you get used to the speed of action, labyrinthine plots, and complex symbolism and spiritualism, it's all completely baffling.

Manga, anime and history

The Japanese have always had a strong tradition of pictorial narrative. (I used to nick my mum's books of medieval Japanese narrative art and look for the rude vases and lewd tapestries, usually with great success.) The term 'manga' literally means 'irresponsible pictures', and was first coined in the early Nineteenth Century by the artist Hokusai. Manga is now used as a generic term for comics: whereas in the West, mainstream comic art is primarily targeted at and viewed by kids, in Japan, manga are available for all ages and tastes. The biggest titles sell literally millions weekly.



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Keep an eye on that tongue, mate! (Legend Of The Overfiend).

►► In the context of a thriving manga industry, it's hardly surprising that animation enjoys a similar level of popularity. 'Anime' (pronounced 'animay') is simply Japanese for 'animation'. While its cult status in the West is a comparatively recent development, anime has been around for many years. Sixties cartoons like *Speed Racer* and *Astro Boy* set the wet-eyed, cutesy agenda for today's animated classics like *Project A-KO* and *Kiki's Delivery Service*.

In the West, anime cliques have sprung up wherever there have been conglomerations of ex-pat Japanese, especially California. But it was the appearance of Katsuhiro Otomo's blistering *Akira* at the Cannes festival in 1990 which acted as a springboard for the genre. *Akira* appeared in art

A brutal gangleader is reduced to jelly at the unmasking of her Velvet Pussy Bloomers (Ultimate Teacher).

cinemas throughout Europe, instantly elevating the genre to cult status. The sell-through video release in 1991 sold so well for Island World in the UK that the company created a new label, Manga Video, and has been releasing titles steadily at a rate of two or three a month ever since.

The positions of Manga films in the retail charts bears testimony to their popularity. During the week of release, films have streaked into the top ten, above major releases of cinema blockbusters. *Vampire Hunter D*, for example, is a below-par anime from top director Toyoo Ashida, which entered the sell-through charts at number two, above films like *Lethal Weapon 3* and *Cape Fear*. Anime is the

heavy metal of the animation world, and in the same way that an Iron Maiden single will steam into the top ten, only to disappear shortly afterwards, so Manga

titles dive in and out of the video charts. This is down to the loyalty of anime fans, who typically will buy every new title during the first few days of its release.

Themes and entrails

Japanese culture, as seen through the eyes of its film industry, is alien to an uninitiated Western audience. The first few anime films you watch will enthrall you, quite possibly make you want to vomit, or even provoke a reaction of absolute disgust.

Many Manga titles are apocalyptic. In the context of a post-Hiroshima Japan, many directors have taken themes of decay, disease and mutation, both post- and pre-holocaust. *Akira* has a complex web of plots and sub plots involving rival biker gangs in Neo-Tokyo, political activists and beings with superhuman powers. All roads lead to a cataclysmic climax in which the city is reborn in an orgy of destruction.

The theme of rebirth after apocalypse has clear historical roots, and is found in many other films, including *Urotsukidoji: Legend of the Overfiend*. This film, and its sequel *Legend of the Demon Womb*, also illustrates the obsession with sexual

violence and demonic powers. The sequel in particular is gut-churning, featuring sexual acts with machines, serpents, and grotesque demons. For some it's quite simply appalling; for others, the *Overfiend* films are a fascinating vision of an amoral world, a parable of three kingdoms (human, demon and man-beast) and the inevitable destructiveness of messianic prophecy. It's heavy, heavy stuff.

However, it's all too easy to overlook the lighter side of anime. Though the majority of the UK releases have dwelled on the darker side of manga, there are whole genres of anime which have yet to hit the big time in the West. TV series like *Patlabor*, a kind of futuristic *Hill Street Blues*; *Urusei Yatsura*, about an alien superbeing who falls in love with a high school drop-out, and *Captain Tsubasa*; a football drama, all have massive

ANIME TRADEMARKS

- Big wet-look eyes
- Well developed chests
- Transformer-style robots
- Cyber-bikes, limbs etc
- Demons with enormous genitalia
- Schoolgirls with short skirts and superhuman powers
- Tentacles bursting out all over
- Cute princesses with little fluffy animal sidekicks

TOP FIVE GROSSERS

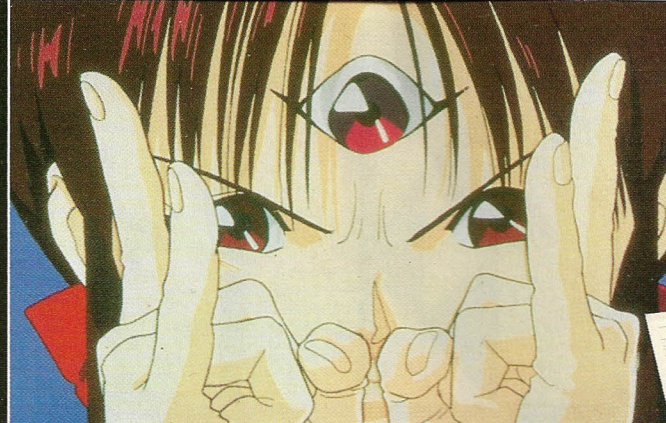
- (They're gore-tastic, mate)
- *Urotsukidoji II: Legend Of The Demon Womb*, MANV 1009
 - *Urotsukidoji: Legend Of The Overfiend*, MANV 1008
 - *Fist Of The North Star*, MANV 1001
 - *Wicked City*, MANV 1023
 - *Doomed Megalopolis (Part 1)*, MANV 1016

TOP FIVE MANGA VIDEO TITLES

- *Akira*, IWCV 1001
- *Crying Freeman (Part 1)*, MANV 1015
- *Lensman*, MANV 1012
- *Project A-Ko*, MANV 1002
- *3 X 3 Eyes (Part 1)*, MANV 1007



Left: Wicked City,
Centre: 3x3 Eyes,
Right: Crying
Freeman.



Manga is an energy, or maybe just
and cartoons for sad overgrown kids

rather gory but superbly animated supernatural tale of demons and destruction set in Tokyo.

Where to buy

Three years ago, getting hold of anime films meant risky (and risqué) mail order or a trip to a specialist video importer. Nowadays the Manga Video releases are available from a whole variety of outlets like Virgin, Our Price, John Menzies and games retailer Future Zone. You can even buy Manga titles in Woolworths.

Most of the releases are feature films, though in the last six months we have seen a number of episodic releases (tapes of around 50 mins per episode). Manga Video has a realistic pricing policy similar to most of the major film houses. Full length features weigh in at £12.99, most others at £8.99 or £10.99. If you're a real anime fan, you could investigate titles from US labels such as AnimEigo, which publishes classic titles such as *Bubblegum Crisis* and its sequel, *Bubblegum Crash*. These titles are available on mail order to the UK, see box out. NTSC LaserDiscs and some widescreen releases can also be hunted down if you're persistent.

The Manga Video releases are all dubbed; the UK voice-overs are generally good, though some of the US dubbing houses they use are less than brilliant. Real anime fans stick to sub-titled versions (such as

the *Akira* Widescreen edition) or even the original Japanese

release accompanied by a photocopied translation of the script balanced on the

knee. There is, of course, the added attraction in this case of the absence of the BBFC or US censors' meddling hands.

CLUBS AND COLLECTABLES

Manga and anime have spawned a sub-culture of addicted collectors. There are regular anime fests, clubs both national and international, areas on electronic bulletin boards dedicated to the cause, specialist model kits... Here are a few teasers for those interested (send SAE to all to secure a reply):

► **The Manga Club, c/o Manga Video, 40 St Peter's Road, London W6 9BD.**

Run by Manga Video for its fans: now over 20,000 members who collectively have bought more than 400,000 videos! Has a fact filled fanzine called MangaZine, packed with news of releases.

► **Anime UK Magazine, 70 Mortimer St, London W1N 7DF.**

The best of the UK's specialist mags, lovingly crafted by complete junkies. Has a mail order operation that sells original cells among trillions of Japanese language anime books.

► **Anime Kyo, 4 St Peter's St, Syston, Leicestershire LE7 1HJ.**

The oldest UK anime club, with a broadly based membership interested in a lot more than just the Manga Video releases.

► **Comet Miniatures, 46-48 Lavender Hill, London SW11 5RH.**

Best collection of manga kits and figurines in the UK. Apparently, the *Akira* Neon Nightmare bike is much in demand. Send SAE and £1 in stamps.

► **The Goodwill Network, attn. Massimo Iorillo, PO Box 3244, 1400 Yverdon, Switzerland.**

They have a catalogue of Japanese imports with over 1,500 LaserDiscs and 900 CDs. Send three bucks (money order).

► **Anime Projects, 64 Stanley Mead, Bradley Stoke, Bristol BS12 0EG.**

Exclusive, if a little expensive, importers and converters of titles unavailable in UK retail outlets, including *Bubblegum Crisis*.

► **AnimEigo, Box 989, Wilmington, North Carolina 28402 USA.**

Loads of original anime films and videos not on sale in the UK. Phone 010 1 919 251 1850 or fax on 010 1 919 763 2376.

domestic viewing figures. In addition there are many feature film length comedies, including the ludicrous *Project A-KO*, in which three schoolgirls with superhuman powers slug it out with alien attackers. This film is also evidence of the rather dubious obsession of Japanese men with schoolgirls and their knickers. Indeed, the story of *Ultimate Teacher* actually centres around a high school gang leader who is brought under control after her classmates discover that she wears frumpy 'Velvet Pussy Bloomers'. Er, quite.

However, the most impressive animes are at the violent end of the spectrum. *Crying Freeman*, a superbly rendered animation of the original manga, is a tender love story set in the brutal world of the Chinese Mafia and Japanese Yakusa. (It, too, recently entered the sell through video

Three schoolgirls with
superhuman powers
and short skirts.

charts at number two.) Other superb episodic releases include *3x3 Eyes*, an occult adventure centred around a mysterious statue, and *Doomed Megalopolis*, a

